



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Poet Evie Shockley on Why Poems Are an Analysis Genre

The Rutgers professor, who left a career in law to pursue literature, speaks with Fred about the role of poetry in social justice, documenting and analyzing our lived experiences through poems, and why, contrary to popular belief, poems are one of the most accessible mediums of expression. And she reads two of her own.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On our podcast, we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars, who travel the country for us visiting campuses and presenting free lectures that we invite you to attend. For the Visiting Scholars schedule, please visit pbk.org.

Today, I'm delighted to welcome Dr. Evie Shockley, Professor of English at Rutgers University. She's the author of three books of poetry, including *semiautomatic*, which won the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. As a poet and scholar, she explores the tensions between two incarnations of the muse, knowledge and imagination, examining the social and political implications of both. Among her many, many honors are the Lannan Literary Award, Stephen Henderson Award, the Holmes National Poetry Prize, and fellowships from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the American Council of Learned Societies.

Welcome, Professor Shockley.

Evie Shockley: Thank you. It's good to be here.

Lawrence: You were born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, is that right?

Shockley: That is correct.

Lawrence: And the child of two public school teachers in a home filled with books and a love for reading. So, was it always natural that you were going to be a poet?

Shockley: A poet, I don't know, but a reader and a lover of language, I think that was perhaps inevitable. I know my mom wanted me to read different things than I read. She wanted me to read history, and science, and things that were going to be more enriching, I think, to her mind. I was in love with fiction. I wanted to read stories, stories, stories, stories. And what I love to think about looking back is how much about the world I learned by reading stories, right? And that I think has been one of the things that has stuck with me as a writer, is that I don't have to be writing my scholarship to be conveying knowledge and provoking thought.

Lawrence: So, listen, we're getting a little ahead of ourselves, because it's not as if you went straight from that book-filled house through high school, college at Northwestern, and became a poet. There's a little detour at University of Michigan Law School, I'm proud to say, and a cum laude graduate, no less. You clerked for Judge Nathaniel Jones on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit out in the Midwest, and then you were an environmental lawyer at Sidley and Austin, so you're what we call a recovering lawyer.

Shockley: I am a recovering lawyer, or maybe... Let's just say recovered.

Lawrence: Oh, don't say that too fast, but you do go in a pretty good tradition. I mean, just off the top of my head, Proust, Flaubert, Henry Fielding, Henry James, Franz Kafka, Wallace Stevens, these were all... Well, law school dropouts or in some cases lawyers who actually practiced for some time, but somewhere along the line they said, "That's not what's going to make it happen." So, what happened to Evie Shockley that at one point you said being an environmental lawyer is not what's going to make it happen for me?

Shockley: My parents and other people who cared about me, most of whom were in education, tried to steer me away from education as a profession in which you were overworked and underpaid, frankly.

Lawrence: Right.

Shockley: They wanted me to go into something that was secure, that would give me a "good life," quote unquote.

Lawrence: Like law.

Shockley: Like law. Someone, I can't remember if it was my mother or another advisor, said to me, "You know, lawyers read and write. You like to read and write. You should go to law school." And truer and yet less helpful words were never spoken. Because it was a very different kind of reading and writing. There are a lot of ways I could sort of walk through this path. One is to say that I was fortunate in getting a tuition scholarship, so while I took out some loans, I didn't have to take out the sort of huge and overwhelming kind of loans that a lot of law students do.

Lawrence: So, it gave you some freedom in terms of what your path was going to be.

Shockley: Exactly. I mean, it made it seem less like a lifetime commitment to just see what law school was like. And then, once I had finished, my mother wanted me to give practice a chance, and so I did that, but my heart was never in it. And I say that knowing that I was at one of the best firms not just sort of in the country, certainly in Chicago where I was practicing, but one of the best firms for me, a firm that regularly sent people back into the academy as law professors.

Lawrence: You bet.

Shockley: Yeah, that sent people on to jurisprudence careers, and so it was a place where thinking, and the life of the mind, was entertained alongside sort of the practicalities.

Lawrence: They didn't look at you funny because you were asking philosophical questions. There was a lot of that kind of talk going on as well as there was practicing law.

Shockley: Exactly. Exactly. So, it was a great firm, a great time to be there. I overlapped with some notable people. I'll just leave it at that. But-

Lawrence: Okay. I was going to ask you, but I won't. I won't pry unless you got one you want to share.

Shockley: A woman named Michelle Robinson was my advisor when I was a junior attorney.

Lawrence: We're talking about Michelle Robinson Obama, who at the time was probably the more prominent lawyer of the two.

Shockley: It was a good place to be trying out a legal career, but it was clear to me pretty much from the start that the law allowed me or could allow me to think about some of the things that mattered to me, but not from the perspective or with the kind of freedom that I wanted. I certainly chafed under the burden of advocacy. Not being able to argue my position, but always of course being bound to argue my client's position.

Lawrence: I've described my own transition from practicing law into the academy as realizing one day that the lawyer does it till its due and the academic does it till it's done.

Shockley: I love that!

Lawrence: And they are very different functions and I think if the legal academic does it till its done, how much more so the writer or the poet who has to have every word just where it's supposed to be. So, look, let's talk about the... where Nathaniel Jones continues to course through your veins, if I may, and that is you've talked about the role of poetry and poets to promote social justice. How do you see poetry as engaging politics and promoting social justice?

Shockley: The way that poetry and the pursuit of social justice or thinking about politics intersect for me comes in with the way that poetry can record the quality of our lives, provide a certain kind of evidence for what the experience of the world is from various positions. So, that's the work of lots of different poets in lots of different places writing about their

own experiences. Poetry is for me very much an analytical form. I think of my scholarship as a different genre of analysis rather than a sort of a different relationship to analysis.

Poems can analyze the political scene. They inform people. They can heap praise on people who are worthy of being praised for the work that they're doing out in the world, which is sometimes where I get pushback from people who want to say poetry is never really political because it doesn't do anything in the world. And I think that poetry does do things in the world even if it's person by person in the kinds of changes it makes in people's minds and hearts, opening them onto new experiences that they may not have personally had but can see through a poem, or introducing them to critiques of things that are going on.

But I feel like poems also can do the work of recording what's happening in the political movements that are going on around us.

Lawrence: I want to ask you, if you would, to read one of your wonderful poems from semiautomatic, which as I said in the intro was a finalist for the 2018 Pulitzer Prize, but let me read a little bit about what the Pulitzer board said about semiautomatic. This is their language. "A brilliant leap of faith into the echoing abyss of language. Part rap, part rant, part slam, part performance art that leaves the reader unsettled, challenged, and bettered by the poet's words."

So, I wonder if with that sense of what's at stake here, you'd read for us playing with fire?

Shockley: Yes, I'd be happy to. It's a poem that feels as timely now as when I wrote it, and I'm thinking about Kenosha, Wisconsin right now.

Lawrence: You bet.

Shockley: But this had a different instigating incident.

Lawrence: Well, tell us a little bit about that and then read us the poem.

Shockley: Sure. This poem was written shortly after the shooting of Mark Duggan in the U.K., in England, after a series of... some people call them uprisings, some people call them riots, that just reflect the same kind of urge of people who have been under foot for too long to voice their dissent in a way that they hope will be heard.

Lawrence: There's a reference in here to Brixton, a part of London with a predominantly African and Caribbean British population.

Shockley: Absolutely.

Lawrence: Not unlike many of our own cities in the United States that have similar places with tragically similar stories. Some of them in the very recent past and right up to the present.

Shockley: Yes, and some of those are referenced in the poem, as well. I'm also thinking about Martin Luther King's comment that the riot is the language of the unheard. So, this is *playing with fire*.

*something is always burning, passion,
pride, envy, desire, the internal organs
going chokingly up in smoke, as some-
thing outside the body exerts a pull
that drags us like a match across sand-
paper. something is always burning,
london, paris, detroit, l.a., the neighbor-*

*hoods no one outside seems to see until
they're backlit by flames, when the out-
siders, peering through dense, acrid,
black-&-orange-rimmed fumes, mis-
take their dark reflections for savages
altogether alien. how hot are the london
riots for west end pearls? How hot in tot-*

*tenham? if one bead of cream rolls down
one precious neck, heads will roll in brix-
ton: the science of sociology. the mark
duggan principle of cause and effect:
under conditions of sufficient pressure-
measured roughly in years + lead ÷ £s-
black blood is highly combustible.*

Lawrence: So much to unpack there. The language itself is hot to the touch. You can feel it. We are ourselves pulled like a match across sandpaper. Are we all in this poem, whether we're observers or actors?

Shockley: I certainly think so. We're the insiders or the outsiders, and even if we're outsiders geographically, I like to say that we don't have to identify that way. The poem wants to bring readers who may not have thought about what sparks a riot or sparks that kind of outrage into the group of us who are thinking about these things and who are thinking about what it would take to create conditions in which Black blood is not so particularly combustible.

Lawrence: Let's talk about some of the teaching that you've done. I want to come to Rutgers momentarily, but first you have taught in a lot of different settings, including at Rikers Island, at the Rose M. Singer Center, where I actually was involved as a young assistant U.S. attorney, bringing a case for excessive use of force by correctional officers against inmates, so I know Rikers better than I wish I did in some ways. What was it like teaching poetry there?

Shockley: I mean, it is both the same and different, and it's very different not to be able to bring in all the materials that you'd like to use to teach with. There are so many restrictions on what one can bring in. You can't bring a recording of a poet that you'd like to share with them and so forth. The people are more or less the same, and that is they're equally divided between a fear of poetry and a desire to express themselves in poetry. It's amazing that the extent to which poetry... I think because sometimes how it's taught in high schools and junior high schools, poetry makes people feel that they have to come up to some certain standard of familiarity or knowledge of a tradition and so forth to be able to read it right, read it intelligently, or accurately, or whatever, to open its secrets.

Whereas I think everyone sort of instinctively feels that they have a voice and feels that they have something to say, and poetry seems to be an obvious and in a lot of ways an approachable medium in which to express it. And so, what I love to do in any setting in which I'm teaching is try to break down that fear and build up that feeling that poetry is a medium for expression that anyone can jump into.

Lawrence: So, let me take you back to your work. I'd love for you to read a poem from your collection, the new black, 2011 collection, where you are planted which if I may, when I compare it with playing with fire, it feels cooler to me. It feels softer. Almost lush. I wonder if that resonates with you and if you want to tell us a little bit about what prompted you to write where you are planted and then share this beautiful poem with us?

Shockley: Thank you. You know, that's really interesting, hot versus cool. I mean, I think of it as definitely a different poem in tone and in form. This poem is in a form called the... I hear it pronounced Ghazal or Ghazal, a Persian form in its origins that involves couplets with a repeating refrain that your listeners will hear. It also requires the poet to insert their name into the final couplet.

Lawrence: Which you do. And southern trees is the repeating trope that we want to be listening for, right?

Shockley: Absolutely. It is a different... It's a different music. It's inspired by both the complicated relationship I have to the South as a place where I was born and raised, and where I feel at home, and love a lot of the aspects of it, but I also feel really resentful of the way that people who are not from the South talk about the South. And so, I'm trying to express those complicated pulls in this poem in a certain way. So, here's *where you are planted*.

*he's as high as a Georgia pine, my father'd say, half laughing, southern trees
as measure, metaphor, highways lined with kudzu-covered southern trees.*

*fuchsia, lavender, white, light pink, purple : crape myrtle bouquets burst
open on sturdy branches of skin-smooth bark : my favorite southern trees.*

*one hundred degrees in the shade : we settle into still pools of humidity, moss-
dark, beneath live oaks. southern heat makes us grateful for southern trees.*

the maples in our front yard flew in spring on helicopter wings. in fall, we splashed in colored leaves, but never sought sap from these southern trees.

frankly, my dear, that's a magnolia, i tell her, fingering the deep green, nearly plastic leaves, amazed how little a northern girl knows about southern trees.

i've never forgotten the charred bitter fruit of holiday's poplars, nor will i : it's part of what makes me evie : i grew up in the shadow of southern trees.

Lawrence: It's musical. You've gotta find somebody to set it to music. You almost just did as you recited it for us so beautifully, but I do have to ask on a slightly less happy note, the use of the term bitter fruit has got a powerful resonance in the Southern part of the country, and I wonder if that's part of what's coming through here, talking about charred, bitter fruit?

Shockley: Absolutely. Billie Holiday's poplars from the song Strange Fruit.

Lawrence: Strange Fruit. Yeah.

Shockley: Yeah. Yeah. That is... You know, the note that I think connects this poem to playing with fire and many other poems in my collections over the years. There is an insistence I think in my work on even in the moments of celebration, and love, and embrace, to not forget about the larger context in which those more joyous moments are taking place.

Lawrence: Can't forget. Can't forget, right? Isn't this a strange and bitter fruit, Billie Holiday sings.

Shockley: There we are.

Lawrence: And she does it in such a... and other people have sung that song, but nobody's sung it the way Lady Day did, and the way in which it's done with that lilt that she had, and sort of holding back behind the beat just a little bit.

Shockley: Yes.

Lawrence: And she's just observing, and what she's observing is a lynching, and it just tears your heart out.

Shockley: It is a beautiful, a beautiful rendition. I mean, the versions of her singing the song are another example of how you marry the pain and the pleasure of beauty that has to come with... The beauty in her song is both enabled by and inseparable from the sort of the ugliness of lynching and racism.

Lawrence: Right. Right. Can't separate it out. I can't tell just this one story. I gotta tell both stories. They are, in fact, all one story. That's really the point, isn't it?

Shockley: There it is. It's one story.

Lawrence: So, what do you say to not the students who are studying with you because they want to study poetry, but the people you're chatting with at a social gathering, at a party, at a community gathering, the kind... Some of the students you'll meet as a Visiting Scholar

for Phi Beta Kappa this year, who say, “I’m interested in poetry, but what the economists would call the barriers to entry, the intellectual barriers to entry are too great for me. I pick up a novel, I know how to read a novel. I don’t know how to read poetry.” What’s the best way in?

Shockley: The best way in is by reading poetry and sometimes reading poetry in company, where you can talk with someone about what you are seeing in the lines. I often think of reading criticism, which I don’t expect anyone outside the discipline necessarily to do, but I think of reading criticism as my way of being able to have a conversation with someone who’s thought deeply about a poem, and to add their knowledge to my own. I also really always recommend reading poetry out loud. There is nothing like it for making a poem come alive.

Recognize that a poem is not a message that you are supposed to paraphrase. Sometimes there is a “paraphrasable” meaning that one can sort of draw out of a poem, but just as often a poem is a kind of music and a kind of pleasure in what is possible in language that invites you to think and hear along with it. And so, if you’re not hearing the poem, you’re missing half of it.

Lawrence: Right. Well, Evie, thank you for sitting down with us today. I’m so excited that you’re going to be with us as a Visiting Scholar this year. I know that students at campuses all over the country are going to benefit from your passion for poetry, but also your sheer love of the process of the magic of language, so thank you for joining us in the Phi Beta Kappa family this year, and thank you for sitting down with me today on Key Conversations.

Shockley: I’m super excited for the year to come and it’s really been a pleasure talking with you.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Cedric Wilson is lead producer, Virginia Lora is managing producer, Michael Castaneda mixed this episode. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I’m Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

CITATION:

Lawrence, Fred, host. “Poet Evie Shockley on Why Poems Are an Analysis Genre” *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*, The Phi Beta Kappa Society, January 29, 2021. www.pbk.org.

Produced by:

